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# Into the unknown [Amas Mu Vuordá]? Listening to Indigenous voices on the meanings of *Disney's Frozen 2* [Jikŋon 2]

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## ABSTRACT

In 2019, Disney released the animated film *Frozen 2* and included depictions of Indigenous Sámi peoples, landscapes, and lifeways. Communication scholars have critiqued relationships between Disney and Indigenous cultures. However, with *Frozen 2* Sámi consultants initiated a new mode of collaboration with Disney to combat cultural appropriation, linguistic erasure, and misrepresentations. This resulted in almost unanimously positive media praise by Sámi individuals and communities in Scandinavia. By drawing upon an Indigenous listening methodology, we articulate ways Sámi communities discuss the degree to which Disney's *Frozen 2*/*Jikŋon 2* is a transformative agent (or not) in treatment of Indigenous communities in film.

Jagis 2019 Disney almmustahtii animerejuvvon guhkes filmma *Frozen 2*, masa lei váldán mielde Sámi álbmoga, sin duovdagiid ja eallinvugiid govvegiid. Kommunikášuvnna dutkit leat guhká kritiseren Disney vuogi giehtadallat eamiálbmogiid kultuvrraid. *Frozen 2* dahkama oktavuodas sámi rádddeaddiid joavku álggahii guittotge ođđalágan vuogi bargat ovttas Disneyin. Ovttasbarggu ulbmilin lei dáistalit kultuvrralaš rievdeami ja giela jávkama vuostá ja njulget dan boastto gova, man vuosttas *Frozen* attii sápmelaččain. Ovttasbargu oaččui goasii ovttamielalaš rámi medias sihke ovttaskas sámi olbmui ja sámi servošiin. Geavahemiin vuogádaga, mainna gullat eamiálbmogiid mii buktit ovdan sámi servošiid oainnuid das, man olu Disney *Frozen*/*Jikŋon 2* rievdata (dahje ii rievdat) dan mo eamiálbmotvuohta ja eamiálbmotservvodagat čájehuvvojit filmmas. Sámiid ulbmilin ovttasbarggu álggaheamis lei buktit sámi áššiid oidnosii, lasihit iežaset álbmoga olbmuid bargovejolašvuođaid, ja dahkat sámegeilat Disneyfilmma skeaŋkan sámi mánáide.

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In November 2019, Disney launched the animated feature film *Frozen 2* (Buck & Lee, 2019), which set the record for the biggest global opening for an animated film (Guerrasio, 2019). Noteworthy aspects of *Frozen 2* include depictions of Indigenous Sámi peoples and

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that it is the first Disney film to be dubbed into a Sámi language launching at the same time as other Scandinavian versions.<sup>1</sup> In the past, Indigenous peoples, ethnic minority communities, and media scholars criticized how Disney interacted with Indigenous groups and represented them in their films. With *Frozen 2*, Sámi parliaments of Norway, Sweden, and Finland, along with the Saami Council,<sup>2</sup> brought together a group cultural consultants for the Walt Disney animation team in the process of portraying Sámi cultures, histories, and society. Additionally, a formal contract was drawn up between Walt Disney Animation Studios and these entities to ensure that content of *Frozen 2* was “culturally sensitive, appropriate and respectful of the Sámi and their culture” (Simonpillai, 2019, para 9–11).<sup>3</sup> Many Sámi peoples and institutions are highly supportive of *Frozen 2* and engaged in collaborative efforts with Disney to increase their visibility, promote employment of their peoples, and create a gift, albeit a complicated one, to give to their children.

In this article, we – as media studies scholars situated in relation to different Indigenous communities – bring a critical cultural approach in an effort to understand discourses around *Frozen 2/Jikŋon 2* in Norwegian parts of Sápmi.<sup>4</sup> To connect with these vernacular meanings, we listen actively to Indigenous comments about meanings of the film. To counter Indigenous erasure and engage Indigenous discourses more responsibly, we reflect on Sámi people’s and communities’ mediated *Frozen 2/Jikŋon 2* comments, stories, shares, as well as explicit utterances and performances initiated in national and regional media. Our aim is thus not to listen to, and bring forth, a “unified” Sámi voice; indeed, a single “Sámi perspective” does not exist, as epistemologies are motivated and shaped by different groundings, histories, and contexts. This said, we especially listen to Sámi leaders and key Sámi institutions in Norwegian parts of Sápmi because of their explicit strategies and political motivations.

## Relevant literature: Media studies and Disney

Media are key in processes of history and memory, nation-building, self-articulation, and empowerment. Following Appadurai (1996), media offer resources for self-making, allowing “scripts for possible lives to the imbricated with the glamour of film stars and fantastic film plots” (p. 3). Media also make up an arena for identity building and a means to challenge established discourses, for instance through memory contestation, decolonization dynamics, and public debate.

Disney is one of the world’s largest and most popular entertainment and media corporations, using films, books, toys, clothing, songs, TV programs, and the internet to promote the “Disney world.” Media, communication, and cultural scholars have long had interest in Disney and several address ethnic minorities, race, or Native and Indigenous cultures (Breau, 2010; Edgerton & Jackson, 1996; Kiyomi, 2000; Law, 2018; Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2009; Mayer, 2015; Ramnarine, 2015; Schmidt, 2006; Towbin et al., 2004; Yoshinaga, 2019). While it is not our purpose to provide an extensive overview of academic discussions of Disney,<sup>5</sup> we bring forth some criticism expressed specifically regarding Disney’s dealings with Indigenous, Ethnic minority and/or First Nations and cultures. Some claim certain Disney films function as rewritings or sanitizing reconciliation tools, which cash in on a denial of racist pasts (Breau, 2010) and normalize whiteness (Gregory, 2010). Further, when Disney produces films, costumes, experiences, and toys about Indigenous peoples, they enter

into ongoing commodification of culture, cultural abrasion by media systems, and cultural appropriation debates.<sup>6</sup>

In the process of this cultural work, Disney offers its audiences a moment of escape in the “wonderful world of Disney” (Wasko, 2001). However, a problem surfaces when Disney offers predominately white viewers, and others with colonial histories, an opportunity to consume films that depict Indigenous characters, topics, and lands as exotic. This can be articulated through Torgovnick’s (1991) conception of “the trope of the primitive.” “Indigenous” Disney characters and landscapes become sites of escapism where non-Indigenous peoples engage with desires they repress and seek in other cultures. As Rogers (2009) states, “the primitive Other has long been a site for the projection of Western fears and fantasies, for working through tensions and anxieties while maintaining an illusion of the integrity of Western cultures and identities” (p. 49).

Much of these fantasies are crystalized through actions of those who culturally appropriate and misrepresent; they “steal and warp Indigenous tales, tropes, and iconographies within the cultural landscape in colonialist and racist ways,” enabling discursive colonization and exploitation (Yoshinaga, 2019, p. 203). For example, Disney’s *Pocahontas* (Gabriel & Goldberg, 1995) is widely criticized for sexualizing, dehumanizing, and commodifying a hyper-real version of Native American women (Bird, 1999; Cordes & Merskin, 2019; Green, 1975), as well as reproducing orientalism and justifying colonialism (Kiyomi, 2000).

More recently, Disney produced *Moana* (Clements & Musker, 2016) which stories “Ancient” Polynesia. It was a box office success but met with mixed reviews by Kanaka Maoli peoples. This is despite Disney Animation’s consultation with linguists, cultural anthropologists, and historians in Polynesia, whom they named “the Oceanic Trust” (Robinson, 2016). While Disney gave Hawaiian children a story that included characters who actually looked like them and even dubbed the film in Hawaiian (“Ōlelo Hawai’i”), they also culturally reproduced the islands as exotic vacation destinations and drew upon outdated and damaging gender stereotypes (Yoshinaga, 2019).

Disney acknowledged criticism of *Moana* and invited Sámi peoples to mobilize a new mode of collaboration, supported by Disney Animation chief John Lasseter, in the case of *Frozen 2*. The first *Frozen* film was made without any official consulting with Sámi peoples despite having visual and musical references to Sámi culture (Ramnarine, 2015). With *Frozen 2* the referencing is more explicit and expanded considerably into the storyline and visual representations. For instance, the Northuldra people in *Frozen 2* are inspired by ethnographic descriptions of Sámi culture, both in terms of reindeer herding, clothing, traditions, and relationships with nature (Filmpolitiet, 2019).

### **Spoiler alert: *Frozen 2* synopsis and Indigenous Sámi cultures**

*Frozen 2* (Buck & Lee, 2019) is the much-anticipated sequel to Disney’s *Frozen* and continues adventures of sisters Queen Anna and Princess Elsa from Arendelle as they go to a mystical land to find the source of Elsa’s powers and learn about their family ancestry. After Arendelle-inhabitants evacuate their kingdom following a supernatural attack, Elsa, Anna, and their sidekicks head into an enchanted forest, where they find out that Anna and Elsa’s late father encountered the Northuldra Tribe (inspired by Sámi peoples) as a young boy. He traveled to the woods together with *his* father (Elsa and

Anna's grandfather) to present the Northuldra a dam – an apparent gift of peace. But as the plot unfolds it turns out the dam was an act of sabotage meant to harm the Tribe's lands. They also learn it was their grandfather who precipitated an attack on a Northuldra leader. In response to the battle, the Enchanted Forest (where Northuldra people live) demonstrated its own sovereignty and covered itself in an impenetrable mist. Now, Elsa and Anna are allowed to enter to find the truth about their ancestor's misdeeds. As part of this "exploration," they discover they are in fact of mixed Northuldran ancestry, as their mother was a Tribal member who saved their father during the battle, escaped with him out of the forest, and later married him (Kang, 2019).

Important to note, is while Sámi leaders and key institutions largely praised the film and opportunities it has created, there were hypercritical voices internationally (particularly in the US) regarding racial representation. For example, there is that critical plot in *Frozen 2* where Elsa and Anna find out that their mother is Indigenous when they "encounter" the people of Northuldra. In response, some commentaries (Kain, 2019) claim Disney whitewashed peoples of Northuldra and that neither Elsa or Anna has any physical signs of being part mixed-race. Some of these critiques are complicated, yet they speak to issues with Disney's creation of racial expectations visually. Indigenous identity should not be defined by narrow conceptions of racial expectation. In films and in real-life Indigenous people can, for example, be white-coded yet still have meaningful connections to Indigenous political, familial, and community life. However, lived experiences and marginalization are different for Indigenous people based on the color of the skin and the perceptions of authenticity and belonging that media proliferates. This critique also plays into deeper racial and settler colonial mythology of the "Indian-grandmother complex" (Deloria in Tuck & Yang, 2012) – a colonial fantasy of people believing they have an Indian princess mother or grandmother with no proof or meaningful ties to their Indigenous citizenship or ancestry. Given that writers of *Frozen 2* are largely American, viewers should question their intention as encoders, their cultural literacy, and ultimately effects of legitimizing this type of racial mythology in a young audience. For instance, there might be reason to reflect on the extent to which a more rigorous and democratic representation of the Sámi people by Disney might help displace its shoddy representations of the Indigenous people of North America where Disney is headquartered. This distancing of Indigeneity might indicate it is something "out there and not here" as there is a long (and continuing) history of settler-citizens mourning the violence against Indigeneity in other places while happily participating in the destruction of "home"-based Indigenous cultures.

There are additional concerns raised about Othering of Sámi cultures in *Frozen 2* that can be evidenced. In the very first scene, Anna and Elsa's father narrates a bedtime story that discusses people of Northuldra as mysterious, harnessing the magic of nature, as guilty of engaging the people of Arendelle in a brutal battle, taking advantage of gifts of the forest, and being so very different (read: exotic). This reflects a stereotypical representation of Indigenous peoples as a dualism: spiritual and close-to-nature, or as savage, enemies of Western civilization (Deloria, 1998). Scholars have long pointed out problematic aspects of Sámi peoples representing themselves/being represented as having a default connection with nature. Mathisen (2004) claims ethno-political appropriation of the idea of the "natural Sámi" can "radically [limit] the possibilities for Sámi self-identification in the modern world ... as ecological keepers of nature" (p. 26). On a

related note, Olsen (2003) discusses the problem of representations of an “emblematic” Sámi culture, which is set up as a counter concept or as “traditional and radically different” from modern majority culture (p. 3).

While it is certainly the job of cultural critics, including ourselves, to point out problematic aspects of neoliberal structures and global media corporations, it is also our job as scholars situated in, and in alliance with, Indigenous communities, to listen to discourses coming out of Indigenous communities. This means taking seriously perspectives that speak differently, or more indirectly, about cultural appropriation, representation and colonization than certain cultural critical scholars we would perhaps otherwise agree with. Yet, it is still valuable to take into consideration why some Indigenous people, certainly not all, consume or produce films that include stereotypical representations and appropriations – as Hall (1997) suggests, to be represented is to be acknowledged. We find that these discussions of *Frozen 2* from Indigenous Sámi people are crucial.

### Methodological approach: Digital listening circle

Self-awareness, reflexivity, and critical thinking about research processes is especially needed in Indigenous contexts (Smith, 2013). As a protocol of responsibility, we would like to acknowledge our positionalities. Trine comes from Norwegian parts of Sápmi and works regularly with/in Sámi communities. She does not self-identify as Sámi, yet considers Kven and Sámi cultures and heritages important to her identity and belonging. Ashley is Native and white and an enrolled citizen of the Coquille Nation, located in what is now known as Oregon in the US. She serves as the Chair of their Culture and Education Committee, working locally but also focusing on the importance of Indigeneity from global perspectives. This *Frozen 2/Jikŋon 2* research work presents a unique opportunity to connect with Indigenous discourses globally and intersects with our ongoing work in communication, tourism, media, and Indigenous studies. We are interested in what aspects of *Frozen 2/Jikŋon 2* Sámi communities discuss in relationship to anticolonial transformation, or the degree to which Disney’s *Frozen 2/Jikŋon 2* is (or is not) a transformative agent in the treatment of Indigeneity and Indigenous communities in the film industry.

To connect with vernacular meanings, we listen to Indigenous knowledge expressions regarding meanings of the film. Here we draw from Kovach (2009) conception of sharing circles to engage in “digital listening circles.” Kovach’s sharing circles prioritize listening to Indigenous people and how they offer their stories, typically in in-person interviews and focus-group contexts. The adjacent methodology of digital listening circles that we apply suggests that carefully listening in digital terrains is yet another protocol of responsibility in our effort to combat colonialism in research methodologies (Smith, 2013). It requires that we are attuned to criticisms, praise, concerns, and cultural productions of Indigenous peoples on matters that concern them on digital media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and comment sections of news platforms. We listen in across platforms and nation-state borders, although we acknowledge that social media algorithms, language and digital situatedness influence which materials we have encountered and listened to.

In this listening work, we have systematically followed Sámi institutions’ social media comments, stories, shares, as well as explicit utterances and performances they have

initiated in national, regional, and local media. We listen and foreground Sámi perspectives before our beliefs as media critics. However, we still allow and expect ourselves to be self-reflexive about this process. Listening actively does not mean closing off one's own active involvement as a critic but acknowledging the value of plural knowledges and perspectives. In particular, we turn to Sabzalian's (2019) anticolonial approach, which includes six interrelated orientations: place, presence, perspective, political nationhood, power, and partnerships to analytically inform our listening. While Sabzalian advocates for engaging with these in the context of transforming civic education to be more inclusive of Indigenous knowledge, these concepts can be applied more broadly in countering Indigenous erasure and engaging with Indigenous topics more conscientiously. Inspired by Sabzalian's (2019) approach, we listen for how Sámi peoples use their involvement in the *Frozen 2/Jikŋon 2* project to emphasize their own presence, challenging the notion that they have vanished into a mainstream Scandinavian homogeneity. Particularly interesting are comments regarding how the film includes illusions to Sámi struggle with majority (Norwegian) perspectives, identity politics (such as racial and gender politics), and Disney's geopolitical implications. We also listen for how Sámi peoples may or may not challenge Disney, a broader Western regime of representation, and potential values and detriments they believe *Frozen 2/Jikŋon 2* has for their peoples. Finally, we listen for power struggles, moments of creativity, partnerships, and resistance by Sámi peoples.

### Analysis: Sámi communities and the Sámi-Disney collaboration

As stated, reactions from Sámi communities in Scandinavia seemed to be almost unanimously positive, commending the Disney Corporation for the process and finished film (Idivuoma & Ballovara, 2019; Larsson et al., 2018; Last, 2019; Nystad et al., 2019; Oskal, 2018; Verstad & Larsen, 2019). On November 4 2019, a few weeks before the world premiere of *Frozen 2*, International Sámi Film Institute shared an image of the *Jikŋon 2* poster on its Facebook page and said:

We are ... impressed by the work of the Sámi Parliaments and Sámi Ráđđi ... that has made the collaboration between Walt Disney Animation Studios and the Sámi people possible ... This collaboration is groundbreaking in so many ways and a good example of how companies can collaborate with Indigenous peoples in a truly respectful way.

Internationally, the Sámi and Disney collaboration also generated media attention (Last, 2019; Mason, 2019, 2020; Määtänen, 2019; Milligan, 2019; Nikel, 2019; Reneau, 2019; Simonpillai, 2019), and non-Sámi Indigenous actors commented on the collaboration. *Indian County Today*, for instance, pointed out how Disney has changed their approach considerably from the first *Frozen* production:

In a landmark move, Disney execs started off the process to make *Frozen 2* by setting up an undisclosed contract with Sámi Indigenous people after the first film used a Sámi-influenced song without consulting anyone. The result was a contract deal resulting in a sincere dedication to Sámi Indigenous culture to include traditional songs, traditional regalia and more than a hat tip to the Sámi culture's respect for the herding of reindeer. (Schilling, 2019, para 3–4)

While the film itself was well-received holistically, there are specific aspects that make *Frozen 2/Jikŋon 2* meaningful to many Sámi peoples.



### ***“To see a Disney princess sing and speak in Sámi language ...”***

One of the first comments we heard about when Sámi communities engage in discourse about Disney’s *Frozen 2/Jikŋon 2*, regards importance of language. *Frozen 2* was dubbed into North Sámi language, the largest of nine Sámi languages<sup>7</sup> and many Sámis and Sámi institutions praised the film because of the difference they think it will have for language recognition and visibility. Anne Lajla Utsi, managing director of the International Sámi Film Institute, said, “It’s a big thing for us, and especially our children, that we can go take them to the film and it will be in our language” (Last, 2019). Well-known Sámi artist Mari Boiné said the film means so much because of struggles to prevent Sámi language from dying and how hard it is to get children and grandchildren to speak Sámi (Idivuoma & Ballovara, 2019).

In light of harsh Norwegianization policies<sup>8</sup> aimed at Sámis in Norway over time – involving such measures as the implementation of boarding schools as well as prohibiting Sámi language use in schools and public areas – it is clear the film is also powerful and emotional. On November 20 2019, NRK Sápmi<sup>9</sup> shared the trailer to *Jikŋon 2* on the official Facebook page with the following introduction in Sámi language: “That feeling when you hear your *heart language* for the first time in a Disney movie 🥰🥰 Are you excited about Jikŋon 2?” (our translation and emphasis). Around the same time, the Sámi talk show *Studio Sápmi* dedicated their end of the year program to *Frozen 2*. One of the program’s guests was Elin Kristina Oskal, the Sámi voice of Princess Anna. Oskal talked about how playing a role in a Disney-film was not even a thinkable option for herself as a girl. Then she reflected on what *Jikŋon 2* means to her 4-year-old little sister: “That she gets to see a Disney princess sing and speak in Sámi language ... it warms my heart!” The active use of language is key to expressing contemporary presence and cultural pride. After all, historically the removal of Sámi languages was an important part of assimilation processes in Norwegian contexts.

Sámi Parliament President Aili Keskitalo said the huge interest in *Jikŋon 2* in different movie theaters is evidence that there is an audience who is starving for Sámi language films (Onsøien, 2020). In fact, all over Norway, premiere events were taking place during opening nights of Norwegian and Sámi versions of *Frozen 2* and Sámi cultures became key in these events. In addition to dressed-up versions of *Frozen 2* characters making an appearance, children and adults came to the premiere wearing Sámi traditional gáktis. There were reindeer, and Sámi games (such as lasso throwing). Thus, opening nights became powerful visual events, saturated with *contemporary* as well as traditional Sámi culture, foregrounding presence of Sámis today. Activities around the film itself also provide important arenas to show and engage Indigenous presence.

Media attention also opens up discussions of how Sámis today are still struggling. On a recent regional development conference, Sámi Parliament President Keskitalo, based her whole talk around *Jikŋon 2*. She said Sámi parents are fighting a daily battle to give their children the opportunity to use Sámi language in contexts where Norwegian language is taken for granted. They are fighting a battle for their children’s attention in a daily life where everything from shopping offers, movies, books, music or online resources, are rarely available in Sámi, but always in Norwegian (Keskitalo, 2019). This underscores



that Sámi parents are fighting *contemporary* battles, in light of current consumer trends, linguistic dominance, and globalizing dynamics. Disney's *Jikŋon 2* is being framed as a potentially helpful tool for Sámi parents in their upbringing of their children.

It is also notable that the Sámi version aired at the same time as other Scandinavian versions as a symbolic act. Rune Fjellheim, Sámi Parliament director, stated that Sámi children will, for the first time, get a feature film in their language and with a recognizable content *at the same time* as the majority population. This happens during the UN year of Indigenous Languages, under auspices of a global media conglomerate (Fjellheim, 2019). We see Sámis celebrate how Disney's *Frozen 2* came out in a Sámi language, even if there are many Sámis that do not actually speak North Sámi language.

On November 4, International Sámi film Institute shared an image of the *Jikŋon 2* poster and said:

This is a historical Disney poster, that represents an important watershed for our people and our language. *Frozen 2* will premiere in North Sámi language the same day as all other [Scandinavian] languages. We have so few films for our children in our own language and that *Frozen 2* is one of the first feature-length animations in Sámi language is just unbelievable and such a precious gift. We are so grateful to Walt Disney Animation Studios for this recognition.

### **Partnerships: “This opportunity by no means fell into our laps ...”**

Another aspect our listening approach brings forth is an understanding of strategic work on the part of some Sámis on behalf of their communities. When the first *Frozen* movie came out in 2013 there were no agreements or official collaboration processes between Disney and Sámi institutions. Though there was not a direct portrayal of Sámis in this film, the choral chant that opens the film was inspired by an ancient Sámi vocal tradition<sup>10</sup> and clothing worn by Kristoff resembled what a Sámi reindeer herder could wear (Stranden, 2013). Inclusion of such elements of Sámi culture with no context or acknowledgment “sparked conversations about cultural appropriation and erasure on social media” (Reneau, 2019, para 1–2). Anne Lajla Utsi, International Sámi Film Institute Director, said, “In all Indigenous communities ... when someone from the outside is using or being inspired by our culture, it’s always a big issue” (Last, 2019).

Importantly, both Sámi peoples were actively approached by Disney and Sámi peoples (including Sámi Parliaments from Norway, Finland, and Sweden, and Saami Council) actively reached out to Disney to make the *Frozen 2* process different. They used a partnership approach when they “formed a Sámi expert advisory group, called *Verddet*” made up of Sámi playwrights, artists, historians, political leaders and elders to work with filmmakers regarding “how to accurately and respectfully portray Sámi culture, history, and society” (Reneau, 2019, para 6–7).

The director of the International Sámi Film Institute was on the *Verddet* advisory group and explained that the group worked closely with Disney:

When it comes to the Sámi-inspired elements of the film ... it feels right for us. ... They have been visiting us in Norway, and we have been visiting them in Burbank ... I think it’s a good example for every other ... film [company] in the world who want to be inspired by Indigenous culture ... If you want to do it, you have to collaborate. (Last, 2019, para 5)

A similar partnership-framing comes from Sámi Parliament President Keskitalo (2019), who said Sámis have *allowed* Disney to be inspired by a collective resource: Sámi cultures, histories, and societies. A starting point is that Sámi cultural heritage must be treated with respect and that Sámis own their own stories. She shared that the collaboration opportunity by no means fell into their laps, it was the result of several people's *strategic and hard work over many years* and not something Disney did just to be nice.

Sámi actors strategically partnered and negotiated with Disney. They actively worked within neoliberal and capitalist structures of dominating culture, but to harness their power and advance the situation for Sámis. Fjellheim (2019), Director of the Sámi Parliament, commended Walt Disney Animation Studios' acknowledgment of the Sámi Parliament and stressed the importance of the formal collaboration agreement and groups involved in the production of *Frozen 2*. He claimed the collaboration was an example to proactively avoid cultural appropriation, and instead *initiate* a cultural collaboration.

When Sámi institutions comment on the collaboration, they say the collaboration went beyond costumes of central characters and expanded into topics explored in the film. For example, the International Sámi Film Institute director said it is positive how the story in *Frozen 2* will give Sámis visibility internationally (Last, 2019). Similarly, Fjellheim (2019) underscored the importance of visibility and presence in national media and noted that Sámis are still dependent on getting support from the large community for development they want to see happen in Sámi communities.

The film brought additional opportunities for Sámis to get space in national media and remind majority cultures about the cost of Norwegianization processes. Mid-December 2019, related to the premiere of Sámi and Norwegian versions of *Frozen 2*, the TV-show *God Morgen Norge*, which airs on national Norwegian TV2, was guested by Marianne Pentha and Lisa Stokke. Pentha and Stokke lent their voices to Elsa in the Sámi and Norwegian *Frozen 2* versions respectively. Pentha, who gave Elsa her Sámi voice, used the opportunity to share how harsh Norwegianization policies came to matter to her own family and impacted how many Sámis felt about their own cultures and languages. Both Stokke and Pentha stressed the value of *Jikŋon 2* for Sámi children today, pointing out that the Sámi version of the film shows that Sámis now are "seen and that they are taken seriously" (TV2, 2019, our translation). The fact that it is a *Disney* production is key, they say, because being included in the most commercial of commercial – the Disney world – symbolizes that Sámis are acknowledged. Pentha and Stokke then sing the Sámi and Norwegian versions of the song "Into the unknown" ("Amas Mu Vuordá"/"Inn i ukjent land") in a unique North Sámi-Norwegian live duet, which has since been spread via links in social media (TV2, 2019).

The film also provides opportunities to show Sámi perspectives. At the end of 2019, Sámi talk show *Studio Sápmi* focused on *Jikŋon 2*, and Sámi Parliament President Keskitalo was a guest on the show. When asked about the reasons for having *Frozen 2* in a Sámi language, Keskitalo said it is especially important as the film is inspired by Sámi culture. She talked about how this is a gift from Sámi people, and that when you are given a gift (like Disney is in this case) something must be given back. It is a kind of trade. Keskitalo provided a Sámi perspective to the situation – allowing Disney to bring in Sámi culture is a Sámi gift to the world of Disney. When asked if the film gives an accurate portrayal of Sámis, she said Sámis will see recognizable elements, especially with language although it *should* be in several Sámi languages. She added

that children in Norway still learn too little about Sámis, and this lack of knowledge is challenging. Many Sámis feel powerless in the face of net trolls and ignorance according to Keskitalo. Yet, Sámis seek out and are often invited to international arenas. We burst out of the small tight boxes *we are being put into*, and our artists and cultural workers are showing us the way, she said.

Despite this celebration and her words about resistance, not all national media outlets were so eager to write about the Sámi-Disney collaboration. In an article about a preview of *Frozen 2*, *Aftenposten*, one of the leading newspapers in Scandinavia and the largest newspaper in Norway (its circulation), wrote that *Norwegian* nature and culture still mark this highly beloved film phenomenon (Glans, 2019). Leaving out Sámi cultures, or absorbing them into the overarching category of Norwegian nature and culture, is problematic and an erasure. *Aftenposten's* lack of acknowledgment of the Sámi connection in national media generated criticism from Sámi communities (Bamvik, 2019).

On a similar note, Sámi Parliament President Keskitalo said that Sámis are equal on paper but not in reality, and that this also has a lot to do with visibility. That is, Sámis are rarely part of the national news scene. Indigenous peoples and minorities need to be visible and the understanding of the majority, according to her (Keskitalo, 2019).

Despite the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK) having a corporate strategy where strengthening Norwegian and Sámi media pluralism and diversity is key, along with a goal of depicting Norwegian and Sámi society (NRK, 2019), Sámi-Disney collaboration stories were not featured on national coverage. This, said Sámi Parliament director Fjellheim (2019), is an example of Norwegian media actively covering up Sámi realities. He then pointed out that it had been much easier to relate to, and negotiate with, Walt Disney Animation Studios than to fight many power structures that ignore Sámis in Norwegian society, including an indifferent Norwegian media industry, where Sámis are either exoticized, trivialized or scandalized. Fjellheim (2019) directed harsh criticism against NRK for its lack of attention to the collaboration and criticized them for failing to report nationally on this event, thus actively covering up Sámi culture. He said, “it seems like we are on our own when trying to reach the majority community with positive news. Invisibility is an incredibly powerful and effective negative instrument at use here” (Fjellheim, 2019, para. 10, our translation). According to Fjellheim (2019), with Disney, they had met a genuine willingness to listen, be considerate and simply meet them with respect. In this regard, the Sámi and Disney collaboration allowed Sámis to work around other colonizing media structures.

### ***Development: “This is just the beginning; it is not the grand finale ...”***

Another area that we learn about when listening to Sámi perspectives on *Frozen 2/Jikŋon 2*, has to do with infrastructure, skills, and knowledge development in Sápmi. According to a Sámi consultant, the Sámi-Disney collaboration provided many “benefits for Sámi people beyond being faithfully represented onscreen” (Last, 2019), and Sámis express enthusiasm around opportunities they believe *Frozen 2/Jikŋon 2* might bring forth. For instance, Sámi tourism businesses and regional destination marketing organizations expected tourism increases in Sápmi following *Frozen 2* since a campaign following the first *Frozen* movie led to Norway experiencing a 170% increase in guest nights from the US in the five years following the launch in 2013 (Nystad, 2019). The president of

the Sámi Parliament said there is a need for action in Sápmi to develop a culturally responsive tourism system that can make use of increased attention. There are several examples of the tourism industry linking itself to the *Frozen 2* universe and landscape. For instance, *Visit Norway* suggests tours named “Let it Go!,” “A Frozen Wonderland,” and “Norway Frozen experience” and recently launched a website that explicitly connects specific destinations and tourism products to *Frozen 2*.<sup>11</sup> This raises an important consideration of whether children and other audiences of *Frozen* films will be able to critically think about tensions between land as Sápmi, Norway, or the fictional frozen wonderland.

In addition to tourism spinoff-attempts, Sámi actors also use *Frozen 2* to direct attention to types of infrastructure that is lacking in Sápmi. On November 12 2019, the Saami Council used its Facebook page to spread an article regarding the need for dubbing facilities in Sápmi (Sunna, 2019). The article pointed out that Sámi dubbing of *Frozen 2* had to be done in a studio outside Sápmi; there were no facilities that fulfilled Disney’s facility requirements in the region. In addition to sharing the article, the Council added that they hoped for a professional dubbing studio in Sápmi as it would help get more dubbing of films into Sámi languages. Furthermore, the collaboration was organized to help develop media production knowledge that will benefit Sápmi via internships with Walt Disney Company’s animation studio in Burbank. This was part of the collaboration agreement reached with Sámi leadership (Last, 2019). On November 21 2019, Sámi International Film Institute posted the call for internship applications on their Facebook page, with the following introduction:

We in the Sámi film Industry welcome the enthusiasm and new film focus the Sámi/Disney collaboration has awakened in Sámi politics, and we have great expectations that this will even lead to more support from the Sámi Parliaments also for ISFI and the Sámi film business and our own film stories.

The call for internships is posted on the Saami Council web page in several Sámi languages, as well as in English. Links presented connect to the different internship specializations topics and lead to Walt Disney Animation Studio web pages where there is more information. There was explanation that knowledge gained via internships should be brought back to Sámi communities (Disney, 2019).

Similarly, when talking about effects of *Frozen 2*, the Sámi Parliament President stressed the infrastructure, competence, and experience Sámi actors and singers gained and how they can use that to benefit their peoples. She said the dream is to be able to tell our own stories to our own children in our own language. It seems like the *Frozen 2* process is a step on the way, but it is “just the beginning,” she says, “not the grand finale” (Keskitalo, 2019).

### **Critical Sámi perspectives**

Some important critical comments have circulated in media. For instance, Lule Sámi scholar and activist May-Britt Öhman questioned the set-up of the *Frozen 2/Jikŋon 2* premiere in Sweden. She commented that priority was given to the Swedish version of the film and Swedish viewers, while the Sámi version and Sámi representatives were set up as a “side-event.” Moreover, she and other Sámi peoples believe they should have the right to know what is in the undisclosed contract and should have been asked to vote on it.

Furthermore, it is important to revisit the dam plot as a central part of *Frozen 2*. Among Sámis or others familiar with Sámi history in Norway, the dam can arouse associations to the Alta Dam Controversy,<sup>12</sup> which was a turning point in history of Sámi empowerment. The dam references general tensions and resource exploitation between Indigenous peoples and colonizing majorities. Despite this visual and narrative connection to this history, there has been little public discussion of the dam reference in the wake of the film. The removal of the dam in the film was framed as something that had to be done but it did not have any serious consequences for Arendelle, the non-Indigenous majority. *Frozen 2* ends with a calculated sense of racial reconciliation when Anna narrates that all problems between people of Arendelle and Northundra are over. This can be read as a settler-move-to-innocence (Tuck & Yang, 2012), re-presenting the facade that problems between Sámi and non-Indigenous peoples are all resolved. This is a representational and narrative problem Disney has not fixed, where they consistently recycle tropes of racial reconciliation or perpetuate that Indigenous peoples are colonizer's helping hand—something that traces back to Disney's *Pocahontas*.

While little criticism of *Frozen 2* by Sámi peoples has surfaced in mainstream media, Sámi peoples who are critical are often accused of being killjoys and “disciplined” for not seeing the good in the film (Personal communication, February 11 2020). As stated, some problems include the fact that the contract made between Disney and the Sámi was not initially disclosed or voted on by voters of the Sámi parliaments. Also, circling back to the importance of language, there are over nine Sámi languages and North Sámi is the language that was chosen for dubbing and it is most pervasive because of colonial politics. This has an effect of presenting North Sámi as the “real” Sámi (Personal communication, February 11 2020). Along similar lines, the symbolism connected to the Sámi in the film (the reindeer, the lavvus, the gákti) are the main symbols used over and over again in tourism and media images, reinforcing the reindeer herding Sámis as the “real” Sámi, while the diversity within Sámi cultures and communities remains invisible. As media scholars situated in/relation to different Indigenous communities, we feel obliged to bring attention to difficult questions, such as if this is discursive colonization in a shiny wrapping, where some Sámis got to decide on the pattern on wrapping paper, but not what is inside? What kind of “gift” is this and does Disney have ulterior motives?

## Discussion

There are several examples of Sámi cultures becoming visible/trending recently in mainstream channels (Dapul, 2019) and films and TV-productions indicate a renewed interest in Sámi cultures. With processes of cultural empowerment taking place in Sápmi, media stories are increasingly told from an insider perspective with a strategy to benefit Sámi communities (Mecsei, 2015). Strong Sámi voices circulate in a wide range of media outlets, providing for instance, the first gákti-dressed Sámi on the cover of the largest women's magazine in Norway and the first Sámi Miss Norway dressed in traditional and contemporary Sámi designs. Netflix recently released an animated movie – *Klaus* (Pablos, 2019) and Sámi cultures are part of symbolism being used in it (Desowitz, 2019). In fact, we may be witnessing a media-infused paradigm, of which *Frozen 2* is a major part of, a shift that affects the relationship between Sámi and the majority and enables different development of Sámi cultures, community life, and languages.

Inspired by Sabzalian (2019) anticolonial approach, we considered local discourses around *Frozen 2/Jikŋon 2*. It became clear how Sámi actors strategically use their situatedness to bring forth Sámi perspectives, for example with Indigenous positions in extractive industry conflicts. Also, Sámi peoples have used their involvement in the *Frozen 2/Jikŋon 2* project as a way to emphasize that they are still here, educating Disney as well as majority audiences in Norwegian contexts. Sámis have made contemporary issues in Sápmi visible and challenged the notion that Sámis have vanished into a mainstream Scandinavian homogeneity.

“Listening” to Sámi voices and centering them in our piece provides an antidote to common research practices of speaking only for Indigenous peoples or engaging in practices of fetishized studies of Indigeneity. Listening to these voices via social media and their contextualizing of the filmic experience honors Indigenous digital epistemologies and agentic dialogue among Sámi peoples and consumers of *Frozen 2* throughout the world.

Some limitations are based on the fact that not everyone engages in critique in online spaces, thus important critical voices are often sidelined. However, to account for this, we specifically sought out dissenting voices such as Öhman’s and not only looked at voices on social media such as Twitter and Facebook but voices from the advisory group, actors, producers, politicians, cultural leaders, as imbedded in popular press articles.

We have listened to Sámi perspectives and how they may or may not challenge Disney, a broader Western regime of representation, and potential values and detriments they say *Frozen 2/Jikŋon 2* has. Foregrounding Sámi perspectives before our beliefs as media critics, we help make visible some positive aspects of the Disney-Sámi collaboration. Still, as few critical Sámi voices have emerged following *Frozen 2*, we felt it was important to detail overarching cultural issues such as Disney corporation’s commodification of Indigenous cultures.

We have foregrounded comments regarding Sámi struggles against majority perspectives, specifically when it comes to extraction and exploitation of natural resources, as well as identity politics (e.g., people talking about skin color of characters), and Disney’s geopolitical implications. Importantly, we have noticed how there are power struggles, but also moments of creativity and resistance, for instance to empower members of Sámi communities to use Disney corporation’s approach as a measure against which the Norwegian majority can be evaluated. Also, we see empowerment taking place as Sámis are seeking to develop infrastructure, knowledge, and experience, which is then seen to be the first step on the way toward doing it all – a made-in-Sápmi-dream.

Finally, we have listened to how Sámi institutions have reached out to Disney, particularly those partnerships that lead to the film being accessible in a North Sámi language. We are inspired to keep reflecting on how we as scholars can be allies in terms of extending and supporting Indigenous knowledge, perspectives, and ongoing decolonizing processes in Sápmi.

## Conclusion: Smitten by Disney?

To delve more into this last and most prominent point, it is important to consider some motivations. In 2019, Disney+ streaming service added content warnings to their older



movies, a choice that generated wide attention (Kim, 2019; Machemer, 2019). Specifically, Disney claimed classic films, including *Dumbo*, *The Jungle Book*, *Peter Pan*, and *Lady and the Tramp* “may contain outdated cultural depictions” or in other more honest terms—racist stereotypes. According to Disney, “while these cartoons do not represent today’s society, they are being presented as they were originally created, because to do otherwise would be the same as claiming these prejudices never existed” (Anderson, 2019, para 16). This leads us to momentarily extend the scope of this discussion to ask, what can a global brand like Disney do (right), when being part of global consumer capitalist culture? Is there any form of storytelling that is possible within frames of neoliberalism and capitalization that is not problematic? Disney’s concern with doing things “the right way” and including more responsible collaborations can be seen as genuine or as a calculated public relations strategy that dovetails on their censorship in Disney+ and a way to “get ahead” of potential racial criticism. Or could it be both? Regardless, inclusion, as Tuck and Yang (2012) state, is not decolonization. Inclusion and consultation with Indigenous communities for Disney films is an important step, perhaps the least Disney could do, but it is not without social and material consequences.

Our inquiry into *Frozen 2/Jikŋon 2* illuminated complexities of these types of projects. Ultimately, there is a degree to which counterhegemonic discourses and strategic goals can be employed within constraints of a capitalist system that Disney is entrenched in/culturally produces. As our analysis has shown, some agentic Sámi peoples strategically used Disney to achieve larger goals such as visibility, employment of peoples, and to create a gift for their children. Media studies gives us plenty of opportunities to question the value of *Frozen 2/Jikŋon 2*, but we use this article as a starting point for more opportunities. While our digital listening approach was generative and foregrounded Indigenous perspectives, it is but one approach. We should not have to tell media and communication scholars to “listen” to Indigenous peoples; they/we should already be doing it, however textocentrism (Conquergood, 2002) of the field often limits the degree to which Indigenous voices are present and centered. We thus call for more scholarly work that brings forth unique ways to approach research in Indigenous communities/on Indigenous topics and experiences in the field of communication and media in a manner that engenders respect, relationality, and a focus on Indigenous perspectives. We seek discussion on how we as media scholars can be allies in terms of extending and supporting what we learn from listening.

## Notes

1. Sámis, who are Indigenous peoples in Norway, have been at the receiving end of colonization and harsh assimilation practices. Displacement, boarding schools and political violation of traditional Sámi practices were part of the colonial ambitions of countries claiming traditional Sámi territory as national property (Kramvig & Flemmen, 2018). Accompanied by unequal power relations, it has had massive impact on Sámi peoples’ lives, such as extensive loss of ethnic identity, language, and traditional knowledge.
2. The Saami Council is a non-governmental Sámi organization with member organizations in Finland, Russia, Norway and Sweden, aiming to promote Sámi rights and interests.
3. Sámi peoples are not homogenous and have multiple cultures despite the wording in the contract.

4. Sápmi refers to a region traditionally occupied by Sámi peoples stretching over northern Scandinavia to the Kola Peninsula.
5. For an overview, see Wasko (2020).
6. This is a debate wherein Disney owns the representations, makes money off of them, and transforms culture into property.
7. There are about 50,000 speakers of nine Sámi languages. 70%–80% speak North Sámi language, while other Sámi languages have fewer speakers (Kelly-Holmes et al., 2011).
8. Norwegianization was an official policy directed at Sámi and Kven peoples of Northern Norway, carried out by the Norwegian government to assimilate them into an ethnically and culturally uniform Norwegian population.
9. NRK Sápmi is the Sámi division of the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation. NRK Sápmi's main mission is to "provide programming for the Sámi people, but the division is also expected to contribute to and enhance the knowledge and information about Sámi society for the rest of the population" (NRK-Sápmi, 2013, para. 4).
10. The song titled "Vuelie" was written by Sámi composer and musician Frode Fjellheim, who adapted it from an earlier rendition he composed (titled "Eatnemen Vuelie," ["Song of the Earth"]). Fjellheim's inspiration came from joik, a Sámi vocal tradition banned by Norwegians as they colonized the Indigenous Sámi (Araujo, 2019).
11. <https://www.visitnorway.com/things-to-do/art-culture/frozen-2-inspired-by-norway/>.
12. The Alta controversy refers to a series of massive protests in Norway in the late 70s/early 80s concerning the construction of a hydroelectric power plant in the Alta river. While starting out as protests among environmentalists, the controversy brought issues of Indigenous rights sharply into focus (Benediktsson, 2008).

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